

## ON THE TALA-ANDIG: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT<sup>1</sup>

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### Geography and the People

Inhabiting the Agusan-Bukidnon border is a group of seminomadic people popularly called the Tala-andig. These people are dispersed on a vast stretch of land extending from Sumapay-Undudan-Kabutbutungan and Bayok bordering the rugged Pantaron and Minala Mountains. Roughly, the distance from Sumapay to Bayok is about three days walk which shows how wide the area is. The Tala-andig, whose number is just a little over 70, are among the very least known cultural groups in the Philippines and are variously called, the *Dibaloyon* (people from the other side), *Kalasanon* (wild people), and *Tigkalasan* (people of the forest). But most often these people are referred to as Tala-andig, because they live in the *lagi-it* (steep place) where the aguho trees usually grow.

The term Tala-andig may connote different meanings which are often derogatory. To the Tala-andig themselves, the term Tala-andig is in reference to the place where they live. Among the Maranao, the term *tala-andig* means "nude" and a variation of the term, "*tala-indag*," would suggest "to lean in idleness." Among the Agusan natives, another variation, "*tiy-andig*," means somebody who is a "forest expert." According to the *dumagats*<sup>2</sup> of Eastern Bukidnon, the term Tala-andig refers to the people who live in the forest, are scantily clad, and are ignorant of "civilization." For instance, in the course of an expedition in Eastern Bukidnon, the writer has heard several times the *dumagats* call "Tala-andig" members of their own group who fit the foregoing description. Perhaps, it was this observation that led Prof. Samuel M. Briones to remark that the term Tala-andig is a misnomer. On the other hand, Mrs. Ludivina R. Opena, a trained folklorist and linguist from Xavier University, stressed that according to a myth in Southern Bukidnon, the Tala-andig are the descendants of a hermaphrodite who

was accursed by the mother and sent away to wander in the forest, to find shelter among the trees. Still, an anthropologist may hypothesize that these people once belonged to a larger cultural group, like the Umayamnon or the Pulangion Manobos of Bukidnon, who are their immediate neighbors; in the course of time, they may have branched out to form a splinter group. This hypothesis may be substantiated by the Tala-andig's close linguistic and physical affinities with these neighbors. Mrs. Opena, who also acted as our interpreter, has observed that the dialect spoken by the Tala-andig is approximately composed of 75 percent Binukid cognates. In fact, speaking in Binukid, she carried out her conversations with the Tala-andigs with relative ease. Examples of terms common between Binukid and Tala-andig are as follows:

English	Tala-andig	Binukid
moon	bulan	bulan
sun	adlaw	adlaw
water	wahig	wahig

The differences could be appreciated in such words as:

English	Tala-andig	Binukid
to boil	sugba	laga
wind	lamag	hangin

The physical appearance of the Tala-andig does not tell much about their identity as a separate ethnic group. To be sure, these people are scantily clad when they are in their natural habitat, with the males almost entirely nude. But a Tala-andig who is garbed in a *dumagat* attire would convincingly appear to be a *dumagat*. Furthermore, when they don *dumagat* clothes, an Umayamnon, a Pulangion and a Tala-andig cannot be told apart simply from appearance.

Although it must be mentioned that there may be some distinguishing features among these people, such as the predominance of the features are more the results of cultural environment rather than inherent features of a separate ethnic group. Most likely, these are abnormalities

resulting from nutritional or dietary factors. It was observed that the bulk of the Tala-andig diet consists mainly of sweet potatoes (*Ipomeo batatas*), some gabi (*Colocasia esculenta*) and some red squash, all of which are the most common food of the people.

The aesthetic inclination of these people finds expression in the tattooing of their bodies. To some extent, it is also expressed in some of their adornments and in their artistically colored knap-sacks made from wild abaca (*Musa textiles*).

The fact that tattooing is more commonly practiced by the women rather than the men may point to its aesthetic value among the Tala-andigs, although other functions of this practice has yet to be discovered. The tattoo is most often made on the breast part, especially around the nipple. The arms are sometimes tattooed. The designs range from the simple inanimate knot-form (*pigbinangga*), as represented by the figure X, to the animate object of lizard-like form (*ginibang*). There are also other designs that include the flower-like forms (*binuldak*) and others like the *kinaluntang*, *pinaahon*, etc.

At some point in their lives both male and female Tala-andigs also break off their teeth. However, there was no information gathered that would indicate this practice to be a part of an initiation rite. What we were told was that, the breaking off of the teeth helps them in masticating the *mama* (betel quid). What is noteworthy, however, is that they pound their *mama* before chewing it. This practice indicates that they, in fact, have difficulty in chewing *mama* without their teeth.

The Tala-andig have the peculiar mannerism of tapping and scratching their heads with the corresponding expression of "e-e-e-eh . . . . . a-a-ay." We first mistook it for the mere act of scratching their heads because of the lice that abound there, especially among the women. However, we later found out that it was the Tala-andig way of expressing disgust or awe. The expression, "E-e-eh . . . a-a-ay," may find its equivalent in the American utterance, "Wow."

### The Kalintala-andig Ritual<sup>3</sup>

The seminomadic character of the Tala-andig can be attributed to their belief in the *kalintala-andig* ritual, which seems to influence all the facets of their life. This ritual, based on the faith of the "true people of the forest," is also the ritual for the god of the hunting dogs.<sup>3</sup> All the

other rituals of the people revolve around this one ritual and are always associated with it. The ceremony is held on a *taligba* (small clearing in the forest made for this purpose), where extreme secrecy is strictly observed. By an injunction which the performers alleged to have received, the *taligba* must be established in a virgin forest (*pualas*), where no other people are expected to intrude. In the celebration, only members of the family performing the ritual are allowed to witness the ceremony. The *taligba* is open to outsiders only when the ceremony is over.

There are ten heads of wild game (*usa*) that are required in the celebration of this ritual. These are to be slaughtered, cleaned, cooked and eaten outside of the *lawig*. The *lawig* is a small hut in the *taligba* built to shelter the people temporarily for the duration of the celebration. The women, however, are prohibited from eating the first five animals. Only the next five are made available to them.

The conduct of the ritual itself requires many rules to be followed and, according to the people's belief, any violation of these would result in a curse and punishment from the god. It would further mean that the people would no longer be blessed by the ritual. Propitiating this god is always the main concern of the people so that, as much as possible, they always try to prevent outsiders from intruding into their territory. Incidences of bad omen, while the ritual is being performed, are deliberately avoided because, as the people believed, these will bring unfavorable consequences on their lives. Should these incidences occur, the ritual is discontinued and transferred to more favorable surroundings. The ceremony has to be started all over again. For instance, if a rainbow appears, if a dog gets a thorn, or if somebody were hurt during the ritual, this would mean that the *taligba* had to be abandoned and be established in another area, where the surroundings would be favorable.

Within their territory, the Tala-andig are seminomadic.<sup>4</sup> It is important to stress, however, that this horizontal mobility<sup>5</sup> is limited to the confines of their territory and, as such, is of no significance as far as cultural interaction is concerned. They do experience cultural contact but not as a result of this constant movement within their own area.

Indeed, one motive for the seminomadic nature of the Tala-andig is

the maintenance of the secrecy of the ritual. These people deem it necessary to transfer from one place to another to prevent outsiders from knowing their exact location, thereby making it difficult for these outsiders to intrude into their *taligba*. These people are also likely to react by transferring to another place when they sense that outsiders may be able to track them down.<sup>6</sup>

### Economy<sup>7</sup>

The influence of the ritual extends even into the economic life of the people. To be sure, their economy revolves around agriculture, hunting/trapping, fishing and food gathering. However it is in primitive agriculture, which is the base of their economy, that the influence of the ritual is most felt and is rationalized in the following:

a) The native's abhorrence of outsiders makes it difficult for farming technology to filter in from outside. Not even those Tala-andig who were able to find their way into the land of the more advanced ethnic groups, like the *dumagats*, exert efforts towards introducing techniques that could revolutionize the farming methods of their people. This is so because they believed that the introduction of outside technology would run contrary to the rules in the observance of the *kalintala-andig* ritual. In fact when we were in Tala-andig country, a ritual (*panlugbak*) was held to propitiate the spirits because of our presence. As it was, our belts, shoes and the cameras that we had with us were concrete evidence of outside technology.

b) Their being seminomadic makes it difficult for them to improve their farm as they are most often deprived of the time to work on it. Such circumstances also discourage them from planting crops that will take a long time to ripen. These people will only plant food crops that can be harvested within a short time and need less care.

c) Their abode being in steep virgin forest makes their farm hardly productive and in fact difficult to cultivate. Our group was appalled to see corn plants that bore no cobs even after reaching maturity. The fact is that these people believe that they are ordained to establish their *taligba* in the forest.

Agriculture is exemplified by the *sakom* where these people plant their crops like sweet potato, red squash, gabi, etc. The farming process

involved is very simple and crude. Felling the trees in the area where they are to establish their *sakom* constitutes the first step. These felled trees are never burnt, but instead are left to decay. To outsiders, this practice may appear crude, but it is not without conservationistic advantage. These felled trees actually serve as mulch, conserving in the soil the moisture and organic substances needed by the plants. They also serve as fertilizer later when they decay. As mulch, they also help prevent the grass from competing with the growing plants.

Hunting and trapping are often interrelated activities of the people. These are not conducted in groups. The Tala-andig goes out individually to set traps and visits these the following morning to see if he had a catch. These traps are crudely fashioned from wood and though the Tala-andig sets a good number of them, there are more often cases when no game is caught. Hunting is probably limited to small birds, judging from the kind of weapon that they use—a bow and arrow made up of rattan and bamboo. A hunting dog, which is used to track wounded game, usually accompanies a hunter. The dog is probably needed for tracking down bigger game that has been wounded, as the type and size of arrow used by the hunter is apparently non-fatal to its injury.

Food gathering among the Tala-andig forms another activity that helps sustain the economic needs of the people. It is done especially by the males, though the females are not exempted. The task is often undertaken after breakfast, which mainly constitutes sweet potatoes. Food gathered usually include edible fruits, as well as pith of rattan and of the *pula* palm. Occasionally the Tala-andig would find relish on red mushrooms, whenever they chance on these. During the dry season, their food gathering includes honey.

Complementing agriculture, hunting and trapping and food gathering is fishing. During our entire stay with these people, we have not observed fishing done in any large group. Fishing was undertaken by two individuals, who went at it to feed their guests. It was done in the river or in nearby creeks. No fish line was used; instead, a homemade speargun powered by rubber band (apparently an adaptation from the lowland) was employed to shoot a harpoon fashioned from metal wire. The Tala-andig also told us that they sometimes use poison from a vine

called *tubli* (*Debris elliptica*) to poison<sup>8</sup> the fish. The catch would include small fishes, like the *tabilolo* and the *pait*, but the fishermen find themselves more rewarded when they are able to catch the eel (*kasili*).

Domesticated animals are chiefly limited to dogs and chickens. The dogs of course, are for hunting, while the chickens are raised mainly for ritual purposes. Chicken eggs are often used in rituals—as, for instance, in the felling of trees. Eggs are placed on the stumps in exchange for the felled trees which the Tala-andig believe to harbor spirits. The eggs are offered to appease the spirits.<sup>9</sup>

### Eating

The Tala-andig eat only twice a day: once in the morning and once in the evening. In between these two meals, they only chew *mama*. The evening meal is relatively heavier than the breakfast because it is in the evening when the day's collection of food is more abundant.

They eat their food either raw or cooked. Sweet potato is cooked by boiling in a frying pan. (The only frying pan we saw among the Tala-andig, it was used in one of the huts we had visited and must have come from other ethnic groups possibly from among the *dumagat*.) Or it is cooked by roasting (*anag*) over ember. The pith of the rattan, when wrapped in leaves, as well as the *gabi* and the *pula* pith, are cooked in the same manner. However, the *pula* pith can also be eaten raw because of its sweet taste. The leaves of the *gabi* are also cooked as vegetable, by boiling with some amount of water in the frying pan that they have. Fish is also cooked the same way, after it has been cleaned, with the water used as soup. Sometimes, however, fish is roasted over embers.

### Shelter

Every Tala-andig family possesses two types of huts. The first type appears to bear a semblance of permanence, but not in the sense of a permanent house in the lowlands. Our interview with the Tala-andig revealed that they would spend less than a year in this hut. Furthermore, we gathered that they would return to this hut only when they were to replenish their food supply, since by this hut they maintained their farm-yard. Most often they would be in the *taligba* celebrating the ritual, or in the forest hunting for food. Sometimes they would even spend the night out in the forest. Several times during our journey, our

Tala-andig guides would point out some spots among roots of trees where they said they sometimes spent the night.

There was one particular hut of this first type where we spent a night in the course of our journey. It had been vacated barely three months after it was built. We learned that a child died in that hut, so that it had to be abandoned because the owner believed it was accursed.

This type of hut is relatively bigger than the second type and may vary in size and shape, from rectangular to square. The flooring is from three to eight feet from the ground and is made up of barks of trees. These barks are set apart from one another so as to allow the dirt to fall to the ground. Walling is not much of a problem since only the section where the people sleep is covered. For this wall the Tala-andig use rattan leaves (*kutos*), barks of trees or split logs (*tinata*). The other sections of the hut are left often at the mercy of strong winds and rain. The roofing is made either of *kutos* or *tinata*. Sometimes stumps of trees serve as posts. Ladders are not common in the huts we visited, but if used, a log with notched steps and placed in slanting position, serves the purpose. Parallel and on both sides of the log are placed two smaller pieces of wood, which serve as railings for one to hold on. The number of hearths (*abu*) depends on the number of nuclear families living in the hut. This is so because each family depends on the heat from the *abu* to protect them from the cold during the night and during cold days.

The second type of hut is the *lawig*, which is normally built on the *taligba* where the people celebrate the *kalintala-andig* ritual. This type of hut is only good for the duration of the celebration. It is abandoned outright when the celebration is over.

This second type of hut is smaller than the first. The frames are made up of even much lighter materials. It is rectangular in shape and the flooring is right on the ground. This flooring is made up of barks of trees held together by rattan. The roofing and the walling are made up of *kutos*, perhaps because rattan grows abundantly in the area. Like the first type of hut, the *lawig* is also partly walled. There is only one hearth inside, which means that only one nuclear family lives there.

### **Clothing and adornment**

The general term for garment is *lugdak*. They may either be locally produced or brought from the other ethnic groups like the *dumagat*.

The men wear g-strings (*talibud*) which is made from tattered clothes (*nahigpit*) that came from outside the area. The women wear blouses (*pinaksoy*) and skirt (*gamit*). A one-piece garment called *kamisola* is also worn by the women and may have been adapted from the lowlands.

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Probably the most original women's apparel with the Tala-andig is the *tabas*, which is locally manufactured by the group and is produced from wild abaca fiber called *alamay*. Its production involves the use of a native abaca stripper called *galingan*. It is followed by pounding and dyeing of the fibers so that only the stronger ones remain. The last step is the *kayukay* or the selection and the weaving of the fibers together in a crude handloom.

Body adornments include the *pugnot* (bracelet) which is made from the seasonal roots of a certain aerial plant.

### Tools/utensils/weapons

The most common tools of the Tala-andig are the harpoon, which is used for fishing and the bow and arrow which are used for hunting. The Tala-andig also have bolos and an ax (the only one we saw), which they used in felling trees. Kitchen utensils would include the frying pan and the *balubal*, a wooden container for honey.

Besides the bow and arrow, the bolos, the spears and perhaps the ax are the only "weapons" that the Tala-andigs have. Actually, however, these items are basically "tools" for food gathering rather than weapons and have not been forged for killing enemies. For one thing, the Tala-andig have been given the injunction not to kill people.

### Conclusion

No definitive, conclusive statement about the Tala-andig can be made at this time and this paper has only attempted to render an ethno-

graphic account of the people. This attempt, therefore, should explain the somewhat narrative presentation of this paper, which is far from exhaustive.

The Tala-andig is one of the least known cultural groups in the Philippines. Written materials on them are very scanty, and often are not available. It is, therefore, the writer's purpose also to contribute what little information he can give concerning the people, so that scholars who would like to make an "in-depth" study on the subject later on can avail of this information.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Initial attempt to establish contact with the Tala-andig was made in the early part of Summer 1975 by the Ethno-Archaeological Expedition of Mindanao State University composed of Samuel M. Briones, the Project Director, Ludivina R. Opeña (PDS Office, Malaybalay, Bukidnon), Gregorio Mercado, Antonio Castillo and the writer. The group failed in its main objective and made, instead, a survey among the Umayamnon and Pulangion natives. It was during this survey, however, that the group met the Datu from Adjawan after a faint lead provided by Amay Amho. Datu Pahagno gave the group fresh information on the Tala-andig and re-kindled the group's desire to establish contact.

The friendship that immediately developed between Prof. Briones and Datu Pahagno led to the return trip. This time, however, the returning group was relatively smaller and was composed of Prof. Briones, Mrs. Opeña, the writer and a *dumagat* mestizo (Ernesto Maguincol), who was a hired help. Accompanying them was Datu Pahagno himself who dutifully served as guide, aside from the five Tala-andig who came down from the mountain to meet us, upon notification of our arrival by the Datu.

It was during our stay with these people that the writer was able to make the following observations. These observations are further supplemented by information gathered through personal interview with our Tala-andig hosts, especially Bangkalawan, Daga, Dodoy, Aga and their relatives, with the able help of Mrs. Opeña, our interpreter.

<sup>2</sup>Inocente Natividad Javier, "The Faith of the 'True People of the Forest'," *Asian and Pacific Quarterly*, X, 1 (Summer 1978), 59.

<sup>3</sup>Beginning with this sentence, this paragraph and the two that immediately follow have appeared in the author's work, "The Faith of the 'True People of the Forest'," *Asian and Pacific Quarterly*, X, 1 (Summer 1978), 58-59. Permission to reprint these and other paragraphs granted by the *Asian and Pacific Quarterly*.

<sup>4</sup>This paragraph, *Asian and Pacific Quarterly*, p. 60.

<sup>5</sup>This is also referred to as trans-humance.

<sup>6</sup>This paragraph, *Asian and Pacific Quarterly*, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup>First four paragraphs of this section, *Asian and Pacific Quarterly*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>8</sup>Actually the poison has no secondary effect and is harmless to those who eat the fish caught in this manner.

<sup>9</sup>This paragraph, *Asian and Pacific Quarterly*, p. 63.